Lord Dunmore–Tool of Land Jobbers or Realistic Champion of Colonial "Rights?": An Inquiry

By Richard O. Curry

In September, 1774, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and the last royal governor of Virginia, led an expedition against the Shawnee Indians in the Ohio country. One wing of his army, commanded by General Andrew Lewis, was surprised by nearly a thousand Shawnee under Cornstalk at Point Pleasant—located at the confluence of the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers. Although he suffered heavy losses, Lewis defeated the Shawnee decisively.

Shortly before the clash at Point Pleasant, troops under Dunmore crossed the Ohio near present-day Parkersburg and marched toward the Shawnee villages located near the mouth of the Scioto. Unaware that Cornstalk had gathered his warriors for an attack on Lewis, Dunmore ordered the general to cross the Ohio, march northwest and join him for a combined attack on the Shawnee towns. But the battle of Point Pleasant ended the fighting. Despite the desire of Lewis' men to wage a war of annihilation Lord Dunmore negotiated a settlement with the Indians at Camp Charlotte.

Dunmore's War paved the way for the settlement of Kentucky and quelled the savages' power so completely that the frontier remained quiet for nearly two years after the American Revolution began at Lexington and Concord in 1775.[1]

These are the basic facts relating to the campaign and its immediate results. But the origins and significance of Lord Dunmore's War have been a subject of historical controversy ever since.

Five years ago, the present writer penned an article: "Lord Dunmore and the West: A Reevaluation" in which he defended the last royal governor of Virginia against charges that he was a "tool of land jobbers" who deliberately launched the campaign against the Shawnee to further his own selfish, economic interests.[2] Dunmore was portrayed as a "farsighted champion of colonial 'rights'" who sought to convince Whitehall of the error of its ways in opposing the westward extension of Virginia's boundaries. Although evidence was cited which contradicts the accepted view of Dunmore's career the *a priori* assumption was made that revolutionary sentiment in Virginia was generated largely by shortsighted imperial western lands policies. The net result, if not totally dis-

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[1] Reuben G. Thwaites and Louise P. Kellogg, eds., *Documentary History of Dunmore's War* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1905).

[2] *West Virginia History*, XIX (July, 1958), 231-243.

astrous, weakened the effort to place Dunmore's career in a more objective light. The frame of reference that should have been used in reconsidering Dunmore's motives is this: to what extent were British western policies responsible for promoting revolutionary sentiment in Virginia? Moreover, the evidence cited in this article which contradicts the generally accepted view that Dunmore acted for selfish economic interests does not prove conclusively that he is not guilty as charged. As a result of these considerations, it is clear that a "re-evaluation" of Dunmore's career yet remains to be done. Nevertheless, there is more than enough available evidence to justify an "inquiry" as to the validity of the old, accepted view.

It is the purpose of this article to repair the deficiencies of "Lord Dunmore and the West: A Re-evaluation." By so doing, it is hoped that the controversial career of Lord Dunmore will be placed in a more realistic and perceptive light.[3]

To review briefly: most historians have vigorously condemned Dunmore's career. Randolph C. Downes interpreted the war as a "complete surrender to land-hungry frontiersmen and speculators." In his view the Shawnee fell victim to the avarice and greed of "Long Knives;" and Dunmore was the instrument through which their machinations found fulfillment.[4] In a similar vein, Thomas P. Abernethy and Clarence W. Alvord argue that Dunmore's actions were motivated almost entirely by a desire for personal gain.[5] In fact, the accepted historical view of Dunmore's War corresponds closely to the interpretation placed on the Virginia governor's activities by his enemies—especially the Pennsylvanians. Dunmore's Pennsylvania adversaries who were interested in the Indian trade, who wanted to discredit Virginia's claims to the region around Fort Pitt and had also promoted the than virtually defunct Vandalia enterprise represented the governor's actions in their most odious light. Defending his expedition against the Shawnee, Dunmore wrote to Lord Dartmouth that "the Philadelphia Papers, and I dare say other means, have been used to make it believed, that I acted only in conjuction with a parcel of Land Jobbers. . . . The Indian disturbances have . . . been wonderfully aiding to Mr. Penn's purpose, and he has not neglected them."[6]

It cannot be denied that John Murray had economic interests in the west. He became governor of Virginia in 1771 and the

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[3] As will be shown later in the paper, one way of attacking this problem that was neglected, if not ignored entirely in earlier article, is this: what evidence was cited by Dunmore's critics to substantiate charges of treachery? A critical examination revealed that if enough evidence does not exist to exonerate the governor entirely from accusations that he deliberately provoked a needless war, there is none at all to justify the charges levelled against Dunmore in the first place.

[4] Randolph C. Downes, "Dunmore's War: An Interpretation," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXI (December, 1934), 311-330.

[5] Thomas P. Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution* (New York, 1937), 98-115; Clarence W. Alvord, *The Mississippi Valley in British Politics* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1917), II, 93.

[6] Dunmore to Dartmouth, December 24, 1774, in Thwaites & Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 390-91. Transcripts of the Dunmore Papers are located at the Library of Congress, Some, but by no means all of these papers pertaining to Lord Dunmore's war are included in *Dunmore's War*.

next year expressed an interest in acquiring land ceded by the Indians in the Treaty of Lochaber of 1770. "Lord Dunmore," wrote a contemporary, "and severall [sic] gentlemen of that country determined upon petitioning the king for some part of it."[7] Even so, Dunmore's career as a Virginia land speculator was not remarkably successful. When he petitioned the Board of Trade for a personal grant of 100,000 acres his request was rejected.[8] Even so, the possibility that Abernethy, Alvord and Downes are correct in adopting the views of Dunmore's enemies as to his motives for attacking the Shawnee cannot be ruled out completely. Nevertheless, evidence overlooked or ignored by these historians strongly suggests that their portrayal of Dunmore as a grasping speculator who wanted war for selfish economic reasons is by no means an objective evaluation.

In the first place it should be pointed out that if "land hunger" is important in explaining the origins of Dunmore's War, the same factor can hardly be overemphasized when explaining the grievances of Virginians against George III. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, the proposed Vandalia enterprise and the Quebec Act all conflicted with the aims and aspirations of colonial Virginians. Yet, during his term of office, Dunmore vigorously upheld the "rights" of Virginia and Virginians.[9] In so doing he incurred the displeasure of his superiors in England and apparently ran some risk to his career in the process.

The Proclamation of 1763 did make provision for granting tracts of land west of the proclamation line to British officers and soldiers who had fought in the French and Indian War. But considerable doubt was expressed at Whitehall as to whether or not Virginians (colonials) were included under the terms of this act. Yet on December 15, 1773, Dunmore boldly announced that colonials "should be at liberty to locate the lands, they claimed under the Royal Proclamation . . . of 1763, WHEREVER they should desire; and that every officer should be allowed a distinct survey, for every thousand acres."[10] For this decision the Virginia governor was severely reprimanded by Lord Dartmouth, the Colonial Secretary who wrote that:

> . . . independent of the general impropriety of laying out lands within this tract until His Majesty's pleasure be finally known, it

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[7] Captain Andrew Hammond to H. Stanley, December 6, 1772, quoted in Alvord, *Mississippi Valley*, II, 182n.

[8] *Journal of the Board of Trade*, February 4, 1774, LXXXII, 14. Transcript located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

[9] During the Pennsylvania-Virginia boundary dispute, Dunmore aggressively upheld the "rights" of Virginia to the region around Fort Pitt. When Governor Penn sent a committee to Williamsburg to seek a compromise solution Dunmore refused to make the slightest concession. The Virginia governor was so outspoken in promoting the interests of his colony that when he led the expedition against the Shawnee it was rumored in Virginia that Dunmore was going west to fight the Pennsylvanians. See: Percy B. Cally, "Lord Dunmore and the Pennsylvania-Virginia Boundary Dispute," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, XXII (June, 1939), 87-100; "The Diary of Landon Carter," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, XIV (July, 1934), 183.

[10] Samuel Wharton, *Facts and Observations Respecting the Country Granted to His Majesty by the Six Nations of Indians* (London, 1775), 52-53; Dunmore's Proclamation, December 15, 1773, Library of Congress transcripts.

> seems to me very doubtful whether provincial officers and soldiers are included in that proclamation, and therefore I trust you will grant no patents for such locations or allow further locations to be made until you have received further Orders from the King.[11]

In a later dispatch Dartmouth was even more emphatic and instructed the governor to make no grants "beyond the limits of the Royal Proclamation of 1763" under any conditions whatsoever.[12] Dunmore not only defended his decision to recognize claims of colonials west of the proclamation line but on several occasions urged the westward extension of Virginia's boundaries as the only sensible solution to the problem of imperial reorganzation.[13]

When the Colonial Office learned of Dunmore's expedition against the Indians, Dartmouth wrote Sir William Johnson that he was at a loss to "guess at the motives which led to the hostilities against the Shawnee."[14] Nevertheless, he threatened Dunmore with dire consequences for his action. Not only had the governor acted without consulting Johnson, Superintendent of Indian affairs in the Northern district, but was accused by Dartmouth of being personally interested in land speculation. Dunmore denied the accusation—maintaining that war was unavoidable. Indians were raiding the frontier with increasing frequency and only by resorting to force could peace be restored. More important, said Dunmore, "no power on earth could restrain the Americans who do not conceive that Government has any right to forbid the settlement of unoccupied lands or to prevent the killing of Indians—their inveterate enemies whose stage of development was little removed from Brute Creation." As no frame of Government had been established for the western region which Virginians were settling despite the proclamation line, the governor again observed that the only practical alternative to a "Set of Democratic Governments of their own" was to extend the boundaries of the Old Dominion westward.[15]

Whether or not Dunmore's defense of his conduct can be accepted at face value, it should be stressed that if he was motivated to attack the Shawnee solely by his own interest in land speculation, his reply to Dartmouth was perceptive in its analysis and criticism of established imperial western lands policies (or the lack of them). Dunmore's defense of the "rights" of Virginians and his realistic appraisal of the consequences of established policies does not in itself clear Dunmore from the charge of acting from base economic motives. Other evidence, however, also suggests that

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[11] Dartmouth to Dunmore, July 6, 1774, in Dunmore Papers, Library of Congress transcripts.

[12] Dartmouth to Dunmore, October 5, 1774, in Samuel Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1st Series, I, 579-80; Samuel Wharton, *Plain Facts* (Philadelphia, 1781), 159.

[13] Dunmore to Dartmouth, April 2, 1774, *Ibid.*; Dunmore to Dartmouth, December 24, 1774, in Thwaites & Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 368-70. See also a petition of settlers in Augusta, Botetourt and Fincastle counties protesting their annexation to the colony of Vandalia. Ohio Company *Papers*, I, 62. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

[14] Dartmouth to Johnson, February 1, 1775, in E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (11 vols., Albany, 1856-1860), VIII, 511.

[15] Dunmore to Dartmouth, December 24, 1774, in Thwaites & Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 368-70. Portions of this report not included above can be found in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th Series, I, 871-876.

he acted for a variety of reasons. On the eve of his departure for the west Dunmore wrote to Dartmouth:

> . . . I expected a War with the Indians, since the Shawnees, Mingoes, and some of the Delawares, have fallen on our frontiers, killed, scalped and most cruelly murdered a great many, women and children . . . , but I hope in eight or ten days to march . . . over the Allegheny Mountains, and then . . . to the mouth of the Scioto, and if I can possibly fall upon these lower towns undiscovered I think I shall be able to put an end to this cruel war in which there is neither honor, pleasure, nor profit.[16]

In another letter Dunmore also said that he was well aware that "Longknives" were as guilty of committing atrocities as the Indians. He expressed his determination to unmask and prosecute renegade whites in an effort to bring the brutal process of attack and retaliation to an end.[17] If Dunmore waged war against the Indians solely from self-interest, he was guilty of hypocrisy—masking his real motives behind a mask of altruistic verbiage. But was the war unnecessary and is such a conclusion feasible? Lyman Copeland Draper thought not—estimating that as many lives were lost on the Virginia frontier in the decade preceding Dunmore's campaign as were forfeited as a result of the war itself.[18] Moreover, Dunmore's critics overlook the fact that the governor attempted to negotiate a peace settlement with the Shawnee before opening hostilities.[19] Then after the battle at Point Pleasant the governor offered the Indians liberal peace terms.[20] After the Revolution began, Virginia agents, attended by representatives of the Continental Congress, pursued Dunmore's policy to its logical conclusion. A peace treaty was signed in 1775 at Fort Pitt.[21]

Abernethy's conclusion that the liberal peace terms Dunmore granted the Shawnee indicate only that the governor was interested in opening Kentucky has no valid basis.[22] Alvord admits that there

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[16] Dunmore to Dartmouth, August 14, 1774, in Thwaites & Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 149-50.

[17] Dunmore to Dartmouth, December 24, 1774, *Ibid.*, 378-79.

[18] *Ibid.*, 374n.

[19] For information concerning these negotiations see Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th Series, I, 871-876.

[20] If Dunmore can be considered a champion of colonial "rights" in pre-Revolutionary Virginia he was none-the-less a loyal subject of George III. After the Revolution began Dunmore was quoted as saying that "he had once fought for Virginians, and that by God he would let them see he cought fight against them." In his burning zeal to crush the revolutionary forces the governor fired the city of Norfolk and attempted to incite a slave insurrection before he was driven from Virginia. In so doing, he earned the hatred of Virginians and all former acts were viewed with suspicion. By some Dunmore's War was now considered a plot against the Virginia militia—a conspiracy planned with diabolical cleverness. The governor must have been in collusion with the Shawnee. By isolating Lewis at Point Pleasant, Dunmore hoped for his destruction at the hands of Cornstalk. Even Andrew Lewis made a statement to this effect before he died in 1781. Of course there is no basis for such charges other than the passions and hatreds engendered by the Revolution. [See: "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XIII (July, 1905), 49; and "Colonel John Stuart's Narrative," in *The West Virginia News* (Ronceverte, W. Va.), June 1, 1938]. Some writers have even tried to "prove" that because of Dunmore's "treachery" the battle of Point Pleasant should be considered the first battle of the American Revolution. For example, see: J. T. McAllister, "The Battle of Point Pleasant," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, IX (April, 1902),402; and Alexander Scott Withers, *Chronicles of Border Warfare* (Cincinnati, 1912), 177-78.

[21] Documents relating to the Treaty of Pittsburgh in June 1775 can be found in Reuben G. Thwaits and Louise P. Kellogg, eds., *Revolution on the Upper Ohio, 1775-1777* (Madison, 1908), 25-127. See also: "Treaty Between Virginia and the Indians at Fort Dunmore (Pittsburgh), June, 1775," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XIV (July, 1906), 54-75.

[22] Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 113-15.

is no conclusive evidence to substantiate this charge but states that he "strongly suspects" the connection.[23] In painting a black picture of Dunmore as a greedy, grasping speculator who inaugurated a needless war, Abernethy even contends that Dunmore's expedition commanded no popular support in Virginia.[24] Far from being true, Dunmore's War was, in fact, the most popular event of his administration. For a short time, his popularity reached unparalleled heights. On his return march, the officers under Dunmore's command passed a resolution praising their commander, "who, we are confident, underwent the great fatigue of this campaign from no other motive than the true interest of this country."[25] When he arrived in Williamsburg, Lord Dunmore was presented with congratulatory addresses from the city,[26] the College of William and Mary,[27] and from the Governor's Council.[28] Then in March 1775, even the Virginia Convention, assembled in opposition to royal authority, resolved that:

> . . . the most cordial thanks of the people of this colony are a tribute justly due our worth Governor, Lord Dunmore, for his truly noble, wise, and spirited conduct, on the late expedition against our Indian enemy; a conduct which at once evinces his Excellency's attention to the true interests of this colony, and a zeal which no dangers can divert, or difficulties hinder, from achieving the most important services to the people, who have the happiness to live under his administration.[29]

Thus, the governor's active opposition to established imperial policies in word and deed—far from proving that he was the "tool of a parcel of land jobbers"—suggests the possibility that Dunmore not only courted personal disaster by his course of action as governor of Virginia but grasped fundamental issues involved in the conflict over western lands that blundering, inept or ill-advised crown officials in London failed completely to comprehend. This is not to say that the westward extension of Virginia's boundaries necessarily provided a panacea for solving the problem of imperial reorganization. But then this is not the major point in question. Alvord, Abernethy and Downes in their monocausative, economic determinist point of view apparently could not appreciate any better than Whitehall that any attempt to resolve the western question without some recognition of the "rights" of Virginians could only have serious consequences for Great Britain. Moreover, these historians in placing almost total responsibility for the war on the governor's shoulders found little merit in the governor's contention that the Shawnee campaign was designed to avert a more serious

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[23] Alvord, *Mississippi Valley*, II, 192-93.
[24] Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 107, 115.
[25] "Address at Fort Gower," November 5, 1774, in *American Archives*, 4th Series, I, 902-03.
[26] *Ibid.*, 1019.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.*, 1043-44.
[29] *Ibid.*, II, 170. Dunmore received similar addresses from the city of Norfolk and the inhabitants of Fincastle County. *Ibid.*, I, 1019-20; II, 301-02. Among those groups that opposed Dunmore's expedition according to Abernethy was the Virginia House of Burgesses. The Virginia Convention, however, was the House of Burgesses sitting as a revolutionary body. Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 113.

uprising against the advancing frontiersman—a frontier advance that neither Dunmore, the British government, nor the Indians could turn aside. Abernethy in maintaining that all opposition to the Quebec Act in Virginia was phrased in religious—that is to say anti-Catholic—terms, overlooks Jefferson's famous essay, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," written while Jefferson was a member of the Virginia Convention of 1775, and in which he denied the right of the British Government to any control whatsoever over western lands—unless, of course, this essay can be considered an anti-Catholic tract in-so-far as it touches on western lands.[30]

If the evidence cited in this paper cannot eliminate the possible validity of the Abernethy-Alvord-Downes interpretation, it certainly shows that it is open to serious question. It suggests, if it cannot prove, that Dunmore's War and the governor's interests in western land may not even have been related. In any case, there is no conclusive evidence, as Alvord admitted, to buttress charges to the contrary. Even if no evidence existed suggesting that other motives were present the very lack of conclusive evidence concerning Dunmore's alleged machinations places the burden of proof back where it belongs—squarely on the shoulders of Dunmore's critics. Perhaps it is instructive to note that the Abernethy and Downes analyses appeared in the 1930's. Since the economic interpretation of history and the "needless war" theme (all wars not only the Civil War) were much more in vogue then than now, it may well be that their interpretation is as much, if not more, a reflection of the 1930's as of the 1770's. In any event, if their view of Dunmore's motives is the valid one, it will have to be based on solid evidence and will involve a more thorough analysis of colonial-imperial relations regarding western lands and Dunmore's role in that controversy than we now have.[31]

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[30] The most recent work dealing with western lands and the American Revolution is Jack M. Sosin, *Whitehall and the Wilderness: The Middle West in British Colonial Policy, 1760-1775* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961). A member of the "imperial" school, Sosin is not sympathetic to Dunmore. But, as Jack P. Greene has observed, one does not get from this study "a clear notion of how important the Western problem was in promoting revolutionary sentiment in the colonies." Until British western policies are investigated "with this question in mind," Greene concluded, "we will not know the precise relationship between the program for the interior and the development of the American Revolution. [See: Greene, review of *Whitehall and the Wilderness*, in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, XIX (April, 1962), 294-297. See also a letter to the editor of *The William and Mary Quarterly* from Curtis P. Nettels, *Ibid.* (July, 1962), 487-88]. Obviously, Greene's comments must also apply to Dunmore's motives as Dunmore was a key figure in the later stages of the controversy in Virginia. Attention must be called, however, to Thad Tate's recent conclusion that western lands were not important in generating revolutionary sentiment in Virginia. This issue was a "potential grievance," he said, which did not become important "until the last stages of the controversy." Even so, Tate apparently has not investigated the western lands issue in depth. Besides, even if Tate's conclusion is valid, this does not detract from the importance of reevaluating Dunmore's motives in light of the western lands question since Dunmore was not involved in Virginia until the "last stages" of the crisis. [See: Thad Tate, "The Coming of the Revolution in Virginia: Britain's Challenge to Virginia's Ruling Class, 1763-1776," *Ibid.* (July, 1962), 323-43]. Moreover, many of Dunmore's decisions do not make any sense at all unless they are considered in the western lands framework.